

THOMAS COLE

Additional works by Thomas Cole in the collection of the National Gallery of Art



Sunrise in the Catskills, 1826, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art



Italian Coast Scene with Ruined Tower, 1838, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of The Circle of the National Gallery of Art



A View of the Mountain Pass Called the Notch of the White Mountains (Crawford Notch), 1839, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Fund

Thomas Cole (1801–1848) was America’s leading landscape painter during the first half of the nineteenth century. Born in England, Cole immigrated to the United States in 1818. He worked briefly as an engraver in Philadelphia before joining his family in Steubenville, Ohio, where he learned the basics of oil painting from an itinerant portrait painter. Some time later, he began making closely observed drawings from nature. In 1823 Cole returned to Philadelphia, where he enrolled in classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and worked in a variety of art-related jobs. By 1825, he had succeeded in selling landscape paintings to several important collectors. The following year he became a founding member of the National Academy of Design. Although Cole enjoyed considerable success painting American scenery, his true ambition was to create a “higher style of landscape” in paintings that conveyed moral or religious meanings. Upon his death in Catskill, New York, at the age of forty-seven, Cole was universally mourned. His impact on the course of American landscape painting was profound and his works influenced numerous younger painters, including Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) and Jasper Francis Cropsey (1823–1900).

The four paintings that constitute Cole’s most famous allegorical series, *The Voyage of Life*, tell the story of Everyman’s journey from childhood to old age. In each painting, a symbolic landscape reflects the stage of life experienced by the Voyager. In the first three works, a winged figure at the prow of the boat holds an hourglass. Sand moves through the hourglass as Everyman passes through the stages of life. In the final painting, the figure at the prow is missing—broken from the boat battered by the passage through time. The explanatory texts Cole composed to accompany each painting appear below.



FIG. 1 *The Voyage of Life: Childhood*, 1842, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

CHILDHOOD A stream is seen issuing from a deep cavern, in the side of a craggy and precipitous mountain, whose summit is hidden in clouds. From out the cave glides a Boat, whose golden prow and sides are sculptured into figures of the Hours: steered by an Angelic Form, and laden with buds and flowers, it bears a laughing Infant, the Voyager whose varied course the artist has attempted to delineate. On either hand the banks of the stream are clothed in luxuriant herbage and flowers. The rising sun bathes the mountains and the flowery banks in rosy light.

The dark cavern is emblematic of our earthly origin, and the mysterious Past. The Boat, composed of Figures of the Hours, images the thought, that we are borne on the hours down the Stream of Life. The Boat identifies the subject in each picture. The rosy light of the morning, the luxuriant flowers and plants, are emblems of the joyousness of early life. The close banks, and the limited scope of the scene, indicate the narrow experience of Childhood, and the nature of its pleasures and desires. The Egyptian Lotus in the foreground of the picture is symbolical of Human Life. Joyousness and wonder are the characteristic emotions of childhood. (**FIG. 1**)



FIG. 2 *The Voyage of Life: Youth*, 1842, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

YOUTH The stream now pursues its course through a landscape of wider scope and more diversified beauty. Trees of rich growth overshadow its banks, and verdant hills form the base of lofty mountains. The Infant of the former scene is become a Youth, on the verge of Manhood. He is now alone in the Boat, and takes the helm himself; and in an attitude of confidence and eager expectation, gazes on a cloudy pile of Architecture, an air-built Castle that rises dome above dome in the far-off blue sky. The Guardian Spirit stands upon the bank of the stream, and with serious yet benignant countenance seems to be bidding the impetuous voyager ‘God Speed.’ The beautiful stream flows directly toward the aerial palace, for a distance; but at length makes a sudden turn, and is seen in glimpses beneath the trees, until it at last descends with rapid current into a rocky ravine, where the voyager will be found in the next picture. Over the remote hills, which seems to intercept the stream and turn it from its hitherto direct course, a path is dimly seen, tending directly toward that cloudy Fabric, which is the object and desire of the voyager.

The scenery of this picture—its clear stream, its lofty trees, its towering mountains, its unbounded distance, and transparent atmosphere—figure forth the romantic beauty of youthful imaginings, when the mind magnifies the Mean and Common into the

Magnificent, before experience teaches what is the Real. The gorgeous cloud-built palace, whose most glorious domes seem yet but half revealed to the eye, growing more and more lofty as we gaze, is emblematic of the day-dreams of youth, its aspirations after glory and fame; and the dimly-seen path would intimate that Youth, in his impetuous career, is forgetful that he is embarked on the Stream of Life, and that its current sweeps along with resistless force, and increases in swiftness as it descends toward the great Ocean of Eternity. (**FIG. 2**)

MANHOOD Storm and cloud enshroud a rugged and dreary landscape. Bare impending precipices rise in the lurid light. The swollen stream rushes furiously down a dark ravine, whirling and foaming in its wild career, and speeding toward the Ocean, which is dimly seen through the mist and falling rain. The boat is there, plunging amid the turbulent waters. The voyager is now a man of middle age: the helm of the boat is gone, and he looks imploringly toward heaven, as if heaven’s aid alone could save him from the perils that surround him. The Guardian Spirit calmly sits in the clouds, watching with an air of solicitude the affrighted voyager. Demon forms are hovering in the air.



FIG. 3 *The Voyage of Life: Manhood*, 1842, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund



FIG. 4 *The Voyage of Life: Old Age*, 1842, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

Trouble is characteristic of the period of Manhood. In Childhood there is no cankering care; in Youth no despairing thought. It is only when experience has taught us the realities of the world, that we lift from our eyes the golden veil of early life; that we feel deep and abiding sorrow; and in the picture, the gloomy, eclipse-like tone, the conflicting elements, the trees riven by tempest, are the allegory; and the Ocean, dimly seen, figures the end of life, to which the voyager is now approaching. The demon forms are Suicide, Intemperance, and Murder, which are the temptations that beset men in their direst trouble. The upward and imploring look of the voyager, shows his dependence on a Superior Power, and that faith saves him from the destruction that seems inevitable. (**FIG. 3**)

OLD AGE Portentous clouds are brooding over a vast and midnight Ocean. A few barren rocks are seen through the gloom—the last shores of the world. These form the mouth of the river, and the boat, shattered by storms, its figures of the hours broken and drooping, is seen gliding over deep waters. Directed by the Guardian Spirit, who thus far has accompanied him unseen, the voyager, now an old man, looks upward to an opening in the clouds, from whence a glorious light bursts forth, and angels are seen descending the cloudy steps, as if to welcome him to the Haven of Immortal Life.

The stream has now reached the Ocean, to which all life is tending. The world, to Old Age, is destitute of interest. There is no longer any green thing upon it. The broken and drooping figures of the boat show that Time is nearly ended. The chains of corporeal existence are falling away; and already the mind has glimpses of Immortal Life. The angelic Being, of whose presence until now the voyager has been unconscious, is revealed to him, and with a countenance beaming with joy, shows to his wondering gaze scenes such as the eye of mortal man has never yet seen. (**FIG. 4**)

As one of two religious allegorical series from the artist’s later years (the other was *The Cross and the World*, which was unfinished at the time of Cole’s death), the first set of *The Voyage of Life* was completed in 1840 and is now in the collection of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, New York. The National Gallery’s set, with canvases of the same size, was painted in Rome, 1841–1842. About 1845, Cole sold the paintings to George K. Shoenberger of Cincinnati, Ohio. In 1908, the paintings were purchased from Shoenberger’s heirs by Ernst H. Huenefeld, who presented them as a gift to the Bethesda Hospital and Deaconess Association of Methodist Church of Cincinnati, where they remained until acquired by the National Gallery of Art in 1971, as a gift of Ailsa Mellon Bruce.

Source for Cole quotations: Franklin Kelly, *American Paintings of the Nineteenth Century, Part 1*, National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue (Washington, 1996), 95–108.